

# NATURE MAGAZINE

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# San Nicolas—The Passing Island

By BRUCE BRYAN

SAN NICOLAS ISLAND, one hundred miles off the southern California coast, is one of Nature's curious freaks. It is encircled by dense beds of kelp that bar all except small boats of shallow draft. Although inhabited by several thousand warlike Indians in prehistoric times, it is today utterly barren. Geologists claim that it is the result of an ancient volcanic upheaval, and that its sand and sandstone are a sublimated form of age-old lava.

Today San Nicolas is about ten miles long and four across at its widest point. Except for a few sparse beds of iceplant and isolated clumps of cactus nothing vegetable exists on its desert surface. Two or three thousand half-wild sheep roam its desolate wastes, the property of a family that rents the island from the government. San Nicolas is reserved by the United States for lighthouse and fortification purposes, although it has never been utilized for either.

Tradition has it that years ago a few trees grew here.

Archaeological parties excavating the vast Indian remains strewn over the great sand dunes have dug up dry and rotted stumps. Tons of shells of all varieties, with abalone predominating, glitter in the sun on top of the middens left by the departed aborigines. Constant cross-ocean gales are eternally lashing the exposed island.

Terrific sandstorms are an almost daily occurrence.

On top of the more or less flat tableland surmounting San Nicolas are weird formations fashioned by the Wind-God. There are curious stalagmitic upcroppings caused by the limestone crust of the plateau being cut into bizarre shapes by the windblown sandgrains. Because it is

constantly being blown into the surrounding sea, San Nicolas is known to fishermen and navigators as the "Passing Island." At the extreme east end cross-currents keep building up a great sandspit, but heavy seas tear it down again, and in a few years as geologic periods are calculated, the island will vanish into the waves as did lost Atlantis.



ON BARREN SAN NICOLAS ISLAND

In the foreground the curious formations made by the winds. The hill in back is an Indian mound